

Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

Volume 8
Issue 2 *The Journal of Mine Action*

Article 48

November 2004

Working Towards a Mine-Free Hemisphere

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Recommended Citation

Fiederlein, Suzanne (2004) "Working Towards a Mine-Free Hemisphere," *Journal of Mine Action* : Vol. 8 : Iss. 2 , Article 48.

Available at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol8/iss2/48>

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Working Towards a “Mine-Free” Hemisphere

The government of Ecuador served as the host of the Americas Regional Mine Action Conference “One More Step Toward a Mine-Free Hemisphere” held in Quito, Ecuador, on August 12–13, 2004. The government of Canada and the Organization of American States Mine Action Program (AICMA, for its initials in Spanish) co-sponsored the conference, the fourth in a series of annual meetings convened in the region since 2001.

The regional gatherings have promoted the exchange of information among members of the mine action community in the hemisphere and fostered a sense of common purpose as the countries strive to reach the goal of a hemisphere free of the negative effects of anti-personnel landmines. This year’s conference, like the one in Lima, Peru, in 2003, also served as a regional preparatory meeting for the Ottawa Convention Review Conference to take place in Nairobi, Kenya, from November 29–December 3, 2004. Over 100 participants from both within the Americas and beyond attended the Quito event.



Mr. Wilyem Lucar from Peru and Dr. Helena Yanez from Ecuador.



The meeting’s agenda included an opportunity for each country delegation to report on the status of its mine action program, as well as regional updates on the mine action pillars of mine clearance, mine risk education, victim assistance and stockpile destruction. Mr. Kerry Brinkert of the Geneva International Center for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) provided an overview of the implementation of the Ottawa Convention in the Americas and other participants reported on preparations for the upcoming Nairobi Review Conference. A panel was included in this year’s conference that reported on the newly drafted (November 2003) Protocol V of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) pertaining to Explosive Remnants of War (ERW). Conference proceedings are posted on the AICMA-Ecuador website at http://www.aicma-ec.org/conferencia_regional.htm.

Among the noteworthy announcements that emerged from the gathering was that all of the States Parties in the hemisphere should have met the requirement to destroy their stockpiled mines by the time they reach Nairobi. Furthermore, all of them will have launched a clearance program by that time, considering Chile’s commencement of demining operations this past August, with Costa Rica and El Salvador already having completed clearance and Honduras finishing in 2004. Colombia continues to work on developing its mine action program, even as its internal conflict remains unresolved; it announced plans to clear its first minefield in October. One remaining issue that arose on several occasions during the conference was the number of landmines the countries were retaining for development and training purposes under Article 3 of the Ottawa Convention. The countries agreed that transparency on this matter was essential.

The countries of the Americas aspire to arrive in Nairobi as an example of regional success with lessons learned to share with others. Conference participants announced progress in furthering South-South Cooperation, including plans for Honduran mine clearance operators to assist in Suriname and the aid provided by Argentina as well as Canada to Colombia in its stockpile destruction activities. These

developments continue the pattern in the Americas of employing expertise from within the region to support mine action programs, as with the use of International Supervisors drawn from a number of Central and South American countries to assist with clearance operations as part of the Mission of Assistance for the Removal of Mines in Central America (MARMINCA) program.

Ecuador and Peru took advantage of the regional conference to hold discussions concerning joint efforts to clear their common border, an initiative supported by the OAS’ Mine Action Program with technical assistance from the Inter-American Defense Board (IADB). Such joint efforts were cited as examples of how coordinated mine action projects between former belligerents can serve as important confidence-building measures. Guatemala presents an excellent case of the value of mine action programs that incorporate former combatants from different sides in an internal conflict.

Several United States government agencies sent representatives to the regional meeting, including the Department of State (DOS), the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) and the Humanitarian Demining Training Center (HDTIC). Mr. Ed Trimakas of the U.S. DOS, Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement (PM/WRA), in a statement to the participants, reviewed the changes that had occurred in his DOS office in the past year, the U.S. government’s humanitarian mine action goals and priorities, and its continuing commitment to addressing the mine/UXO problem.

** Photos c/o Nelson Castillo, OAS/AICMA-Ecuador*

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